

*Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* by Gordon Lynch. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 2005. 236 + xv pp. \$33.95 USD (paper).

In *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* Gordon Lynch argues that “a full academic engagement with popular culture requires that we engage in a rigorous analysis of the truthfulness, meaningfulness, goodness, justice and beauty of popular cultural texts and practices” and that “theological traditions and methods have a distinctive role to play in this process of evaluation (ix).”

Although these are two of Lynch’s foremost goals, he also promotes throughout his work an awareness of Michael Dyson’s call for “ethical patience” when attempting to develop constructive theological evaluations, explicitly seeking to avoid critiques that are hasty, ill-informed or lacking in proper evidence (ix). While Lynch speaks of the necessity of theological reflection in the critique of popular culture, he speaks with equal emphasis on the need for this reflection to be a two-way street between theology and the culture he calls it to study. After a cautious and circumspect analysis of the history of cultural and theological criticism, Lynch revisits his introductory materials and concludes with a call for the opening of a space wherein theology’s role is one of creating an aesthetic view of popular culture; an aesthetic which seeks truth, meaning and justice in the everyday forms of human life.

Lynch’s presentation is organized into three sections of materials. The first, consisting of four chapters, presents a dense, thorough and highly readable summary of the academic study of popular culture, covering major voices from Arnold and Leavis through Adorno, Hall and Fiske. Although neatly demonstrating the lack of any firm formula for what popular culture actually is, Lynch settles upon “popular culture” as a term which leads us to study the environment, practices and resources of everyday life. Lynch reviews basic ideas surrounding the impact of the machine-age, the industrial revolution, electronic media and consumer culture. From here, he begins to make his argument that legitimate questions can be raised concerning the health of popular culture, both in terms of the agency of those who participate in it, and the dehumanization of those who are swallowed up by (or on behalf of) it. Lynch’s point is that theology finds its place in the study of environment, practices and resources of everyday life because theology is “the process of seeking normative answers to questions of truth, goodness, evil, suffering, redemption, and beauty in the context of particular social and cultural situations (36).”

Section two is focused upon the development of a theological approach to the study of popular culture. Having earlier covered the four traditional areas within which these theological studies have fallen, Lynch aligns himself with the tradition of using popular culture’s texts and practices as objects for

the incitement of theological reflection. Therefore, when in section two Lynch covers textual, author-focused, and ethnographic forms of criticism he is not doing so to arm the would-be cultural critic with tools of righteous judgment. Rather, his aim is to enable the theologian to consider popular cultural forms with the intention of reflecting upon their signs and symbols in theological ways. Lynch walks the talk with regards to his early injunction to ethical patience, going to arguably excessive lengths to garner all promise he can out of a particular form. This is most clear when he performs an author-focused analysis of rap music artist Eminem, suggesting that Eminem's violence-laden lyrics can be viewed as speaking of personal redemption in the biblical tradition of Abram's servant Hagar (131). Lynch's analyses in this section are far less dense and atomized than in section one, and at times he runs the risk of excessive talk. It would be helpful to know ahead of time that his aim is not to teach theologians how to "do criticism," but rather to help create an open-mindedness in the theologian so that his or her critiques can be as mutually engaging as possible. This aim is in keeping with Lynch's claim that he adheres to the practice of a "revised correlational" method of dialogue between theology and popular culture (105).

Lynch's final chapter comprises what he considers section three of his work. It offers a brief overview of traditional academic notions of aesthetics, and presents a call for further work in Lynch's ultimate goal: the development of a theological aesthetics of popular culture. In Lynch's view, such a study of popular culture will bring us to ask, amongst other questions, if popular culture's myriad offerings are truthful and meaningful, and if they provide "insights into human experience in ways that are honest, challenging, and redemptive (192)." Lynch's claim here rests, of course, in the implicit presumption that the reader is highly concerned with such particulars, and the explicit claim of an absolute reference point. Lynch's purpose in this concluding chapter is, like the majority of the previous chapters, imminently practical. His call is not for immediate success nor answers, but simply for space to be made for such a study.

Lynch's bibliography in this work runs in excess of twenty-seven pages, demonstrating his reliance and commentary on the work of others and placing him in a discussion with a broad contextual basis. Absent from this is any reference to Gramsci or the explicit use of the term "hegemony," but this is not surprising since much of Lynch's argument aligns itself better with Adorno, calling us to concern ourselves with the possibly dehumanizing aspects of popular culture. In this sense Lynch might be accused of being overtly Marxist, but such an accusation would underestimate the purpose of Lynch's overall outline and his need to reference dehumanization as a way of bringing theology to the forefront of his argument. Theologically, Lynch reaches back to Tillich's idea of theology's relationship with

culture, but quickly moves forward to adopt David Tracy's and Don Browning's views of theology working in a two-way, retrospective relationship with culture. Finally, Lynch is influenced by and closely aligned with Simon Frith in the idea of aesthetics being underutilized in the study of popular culture, bringing this idea into a synthesis with theology in an effort to glean truth, meaning, justice, etc. from cultural practices.

As noted previously, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* is a work devoted to opening up space rather than to tying together loose ends. It does not solve highly specified problems or address meticulously defined issues, nor does it claim to do so. What it does instead is to draw its audience into the arena of popular culture and offer ways of looking upon that culture with a purpose that believes in the existence of an absolute reference point (94). Although Lynch does an admirable job of remaining extremely clinical in his views of popular culture, it remains that his work may be seen by many as fundamentally dubious precisely because of his belief in such a reference point.

This book will be usefully thought-provoking, however, for those who can at least believe that the ideas of truth, meaning and justice are overriding concerns, if not quite absolutes. There is little doubt that the book will strike a chord most of all with those who are involved with theology academically or as part of their religious vocation and want to engage the world around them in mutually beneficial ways. It is to this last group the book seems to offer the most promise, as Lynch seems to be more successful in prompting theologians to fairly engage popular culture than in promoting cultural theorists to fairly engage theology. For the former group, Lynch's work provides an excellent starting point both in its provision of academic background and in its call to practice ethical patience in relation to the secular world.